DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 856 CG 025 200

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TITLE	Effective Group Counseling. ERIC/CASS Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services, Greensboro, NC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-CG-94-02
PUB DATE	Apr 94
CONTRACT	RR93002004
NOTE	3p.; For a book on this subject, see ED 362 822.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Counseling Effectiveness; *Counseling Techniques; *Group Counseling
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on group counseling and how counselors can learn to lead groups effectively. There is a natural tendency for people to gather in groups for mutually beneficial purposes. A section on beginning counseling groups stresses the importance of pregroup planning. A number of issues that can affect the effectiveness of groups are addressed, including the objectives of group counseling, group membership and the screening of potential group members, rules in counseling groups, the time and place of group meetings, and group dynamics. A section on group stages provides a brief overview of the five stages that groups go through: (1) dependency or forming; (2) conflict or storming; (3) cohesion or norming; (4) interdependence or performing; and (5) termination or adjourning. The next section deals with group counseling skills. Important interpersonal skills that leaders of effective counseling groups need to employ are discussed, including active listening, linking, blocking, and summarizing. The digest concludes that conducting effective group counseling relies on the preparation of group leaders and their abilities to plan and conduct groups. (NB)

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ED 366 856

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

CASS DIGEST

April 1994 EDO-CG-94-02

Effective Group Counseling

Samuel T. Gladding

There is a natural tendency for people to gather in groups for mutually beneficial purposes. Through groups, individuals accomplish goals and relate to others in innovative and productive ways (McClure, 1990). People would not survive, let alone thrive, without involvement in groups. This reliance and interdependence is seen in all types of groups from those that are primarily task-oriented to those that are basically therapeutic.

In order to be effective, group leaders must be aware of the power and potency of groups. They must plan ahead and they must be sensitive to the stage of development of the group. Equipped with this knowledge they can utilize appropriate skills to help their groups develop fully (Gladding, 1994). Proper preparation and strategic intervention increase the chance of running a counseling group smoothly and effectively.

Beginning Counseling Groups

A crucial element in starting counseling groups is making decisions beforehand. Pregroup planning is the first step in the process. Leaders design groups so that they will yield productive and pragmatic results for participants. Among the most important considerations are those associated with objectives, membership, rules, time, place, and dynamics.

Objectives of Group Counseling

Group counseling involves individuals who are having difficulties they wish to resolve that are of a personal, educational, social, or vocational nature (Corey & Corey, 1992). These groups are primarily run in educational institutions or agencies. They deal with specific, nonpathological problems that members are aware of prior to joining and which do not involve major personality changes. For instance, group counseling may focus on how members achieve such goals as relating better to their families, becoming organized, or relaxing in the presence of supervisors at work.

Group Membership

Group membership is either homogeneous or heterogeneous. Homogeneous groups are composed of individuals who are similar, such as adolescent boys, single parents or individuals working with grief and loss issues. Heterogeneous groups are made up of people who differ in background, such as adults of various ages with varied careers. While homogeneous groups can concentrate on resolving one issue, their members may be limited experientially. In contrast, heterogeneous groups offer diverse but multifocused membership.

Effective group leaders screen potential members before accepting them. Screening allows leaders to select members and members to select leaders and groups. The ideal group size of eight to 12 allows members an opportunity to express themselves without forming into subgroups. In order to help dispel and overcome misconceptions about groups, leaders can utilize pregroup interviews to identify fears related to upcoming groups. Through feedback and explanation, misunderstandings can be immediately clarified and corrected (Childers & Couch, 1989).

Rules in Counseling Groups

Counseling groups run best when the rules governing them are few and clear. If there are more than a dozen rules, many members will tend to forget some of them. Likewise, if the rules are vague, some members will inevitably violate the letter or spirit of them. In counseling groups, rules should follow the ethical standards of professional organizations, such as the Association for Specialists in Group Work. Members should agree to keep each others' confidentiality, not attack each other verbally or physically, to actively participate in the group process, and to speak one at a time.

Time and Place of Groups

Although counseling groups vary, members need a specific, consistent time and place to meet. Most groups meet for one and one half to two hours each week for 12 to 16 sessions. The meeting room should be quiet and inviting and away from other activities. Groups work best when chairs are arranged in circles where everyone feels a sense of equality with one another and the flow of communication is enhanced (Gladding, 1994).

Group Dynamics

Group member interactions appear simple but they are not. They are complex social processes that occur within groups and that affect actions and outcomes (Lewin, 1948). Group dynamics occur in all groups, and involve the interactions of

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group members and leaders over time, including the roles the members and the leaders take. Individuals have an impact on groups just as groups influence members. The number of group interactions increases exponentially as the size of groups grow. Therefore, keeping track of communication patterns in counseling groups is a demanding job.

The complexity of interaction is magnified by the fact that messages are sent within counseling groups on a verbal as well as a nonverbal level. The nature of this communication is crucial to comprehending what is happening within groups. For example, a member who physically or emotionally distances from a group influences how the group operates as clearly as if he or she makes a statement. As groups develop, members frequently switch roles and patterns of interaction.

Group Stages

In addition to preplanning, effective group counseling leaders recognize that groups go through five stages: dependency, conflict, cohesion, interdependence, and termination. The stages are often called "forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Recognizing group stages gives counselors an opportunity to devise or utilize appropriate leadership interventions.

The first group stage is "dependency" or forming. At this time, group members are unsure of themselves and look to their leaders or others for direction. This process gives members an opportunity to explore who they are in the group and to begin establishing trust. The second stage in group counseling is "conflict," or storming. It may be overt or covert. The type and amount of conflict that is generated relates to how much jockeying for position goes on in the group.

Stage three focuses on "cohesion," or norming, which can be defined as a spirit of "we-ness." In it, members become closer psychologically and are more relaxed. Everyone feels included in the group and productive sharing begins to occur. In the fourth stage, performing, the main work of the group is begun. Interdependence develops. Group members are able to assume a wide variety of constructive roles and work on personal issues. The level of comfort in the group increases too. This is a prime time of problem solving. It occupies about 50% of a typical group's time. The final stage, adjourning deals with termination. Issues of loss in separating from the group are raised. Celebrating the accomplishment of goals is also a primary focus within this stage.

Group Counseling Skills

As with other groups, leaders of effective counseling groups need to employ a variety of interpersonal skills (Corey & Corey, 1992). Among the most important of these are:

a) active listening, where leaders are sensitive to the language, tone, and nonverbal gestures surrounding members' messages;

b) linking, where leaders help members recognize their similarities;

c) blocking, where leaders keep unfocused members from disrupting the group by either redirecting them or preventing them from monopolizing conversations; and

d) summarizing, where leaders help members become aware of what has occurred and how the group and its members have changed.

Empathy, personal warmth, courage, flexibility, inquiry, encouragement, and the ability to confront are vital skills too. Counseling group leaders must wear many hats in helping their groups make progress. The more skills within the counselors' repertoires the more effective they will ultimately become.

Conclusion

Conducting effective group counseling relies on the preparation of group leaders and their abilities to plan and conduct groups. Extra time in preparation is crucial to the life of the group. This process includes screening of members, selecting a manageable number of group participants, establishing a regular place and time for the conducting of the group, and setting rules. In running groups leaders must then recognize and utilize group stages and employ appropriate counseling skills in a timely fashion. Successful group counseling is dependent on many factors. Ultimately, the secrets of conducting effective counseling groups are in learning how groups operate and then personally investing in them.

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This publication was funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions of OERI or ERIC/CASS